

1 Interview Summaries

1.1 Focus Group for Real Estate & Developers

Interview Type	Focus Group
Interview Location	Bureau of Information Systems Building, Augusta
Interview Date	November 8, 2001
Summary Date	February 18, 2001
Interviewer	AGI / Michael Terner (mgt@appgeo.com)
Interviewed:	Chris Neagle, Verrill & Dana Attorneys at Law, cneagle@verrilldata.com Linda Gifford, Central Maine Title Company Sandy Mathieu, Home Builders & Remodelers Association of Maine Tim Walton, Associated Builders & Contractors, Inc., Downeast Chapter

1.1.1 Overview

Attendees represented people involved with the real estate and development trades in Maine. While none of the attendees had first hand experience with GIS, the majority were familiar with the concepts, and the fact that there is a vibrant system in Maine.

Participants included:

- Chris Neagle, Attorney at Law for Verill & Dana. Mr. Neagle is a partner in the firm and he specializes in real estate law.
- Linda Gifford, Attorney who also represents Central Maine Title Company.
- Tim Walton, Executive Director of the Downeast Maine Chapter of Associated Builders & Contractors, Inc. (ABC)
- Sandy Mathieu, Executive Officer of the Home Builders and Remodelers Association of Maine.

The focus group entailed a vibrant and wide ranging discussion of GIS technology and its relevance to real estate and development interests in Maine.

1.1.2 Business Functions

There are numerous business functions for which GIS would provide value to this constituency, including:

- **Site selection:** choosing the most appropriate locations to pursue development.
- **Site evaluation/Feasibility assessment:** helping to assess the appropriateness of a particular site for specific development scenarios.
- **Earthwork planning:** using programs such as “Dig Safe” to assess the risks and precautions that must be taken prior to pursuing earthwork.
- **Natural resources evaluation:** assessing locations for accessing required natural resources, such as deposits for gravel extraction.
- **Resolving land use disputes:** using GIS to provide maps in support of understanding, and resolving land use disputes.

- **Locating in-fill parcels:** evaluating more urban landscapes to identify parcels where in-fill development might be pursued.

1.1.3 Data

Real estate and development interests had a strong interest in a wide range of data sets, some of which exist and some of which would require development. These include:

- Roads
- Parcels
- Public water systems
- Public sewer systems
- Availability of telephone service (both land line and cellular)
- Availability of power
- Availability of cable TV
- Wetlands
- Protected natural resources

Interestingly, the focus group indicated that the availability of overlays such as utility systems and wetlands was much **more important** than the availability of parcel data itself.

1.1.4 Statewide GIS Initiative Needs

The focus group concluded that there are broad needs for GIS data and GIS capabilities within their organizations, however, there is limited ability for these types of entities to create their own capabilities. As such, this focus group was strongly supportive of the state taking affirmative action to make its own resources available to the public. This focus group envisioned the state facilitating the development of, or creating applications that would address the business process requirements described above.

Still the focus group indicated concerns about how to provide the original funding of such an initiative. The focus group indicated that they felt that there would be a willingness to pay user fees to acquire these types of applications. Toward this end, the focus group was supportive of “subscriber based” services that could be supplied by the state, or potential private, third party suppliers that would use state data, and potentially server resources. Under this model, there might even be a possibility of further revenue by selling private sector advertising on the real estate application portion of such a site. There was very adamant opposition to more broad based funding possibilities such as an increase in the Real Estate Transfer Tax (RETT). All focus group members felt that they would be compelled to strongly oppose any initiative to increase the RETT, no matter how valuable the outcome of that initiative.

1.1.5 Stakeholder Roles

The focus group discussed the following GIS stakeholders, and the appropriate role for each in a statewide GIS initiative.

- **The State:** Would centralize its data and make them readily available to both public sector and private sector application developers.
- **The Private Sector:** Would create real estate oriented “premium application services” that would apply state data to real estate business processes such as site selection or site evaluation.
- **The Real Estate Community:** Would be active users of such a premium “real estate services” site, assuming that it contained good data and applicable tools. The focus group indicated a willingness to pay and a recognition that these costs would be borne as the “cost of doing business” and pursuing development in Maine. The real estate community also felt that there was strong enough computer literacy among their community that computer-based services would be well received, and well used.

1.1.6 Major Benefits and Cost Justification

The focus group cataloged a number of benefits that GIS application would provide to the real estate and development communities. These benefits include:

- **Faster Permitting Process:** Participants noted that broader access to GIS information could help facilitate the development permitting activity. GIS information on environmental constraints could help developers anticipate their permitting requirements, and to prepare for them (or select alternative sites). If the state understood that a developer had access to, and used all of the GIS information available to the state, then there would be a better recognition of the planning that preceded a proposal. In addition, with all information readily available to all stakeholders – the developer, the local community, the state – there is a greater chance of a more informed debate, and less bickering about whether relevant information had, or had not been consulted in crafting a proposal.
- **Better Site Selection & Development Decisions:** The focus group forcefully and articulately indicated that there is a genuine desire for them to be good corporate citizens and to avoid conflicts. As one focus group participant stated, developers “want to do the right thing”. Developers want to find, and use good sites appropriate for the proposed use. It is expensive and difficult to fight over some bad sites that inevitably arise from a lack of data. With better information, more widely available there is a far better chance that the real estate and development communities can choose better sites in the first place, thereby minimizing conflict.

Overall, participants felt that a statewide GIS initiative would be beneficial to this constituency. The ABC representative went as far as volunteering the ABC to “go on the road and help sell” this program. Such outreach was thought to be essential for the success of this initiative.